

# Orpheus in the Underworld

Helen McCabe

*The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has inspired numerous writers, artists and composers over the centuries. The following paragraphs, taken from a story by Helen McCabe a sixth-former at Blackburn College, demonstrate that the classical world continues to be a rich source for creative writing:*

‘Play for me, harper, and I will decide whether you can take your Eurydice back with you.’

So I played, and the music seemed to come wafting into my soul through the gently drifting apple blossom, the notes dancing on their too sweet fragrance, the arcs of music curving like the delicate curve of each petal. I do not know what it was that I played; I do not think I knew then. It was the very music of the Elysian Islands, the music of death and eternity itself. And while I played it seemed that the world slowed to nothing, and the apple blossom that was falling remained fixed in the air, and those petals which had been about to fall, stayed, trembling on the trees. Not even the leaves stirred, for the wind died to nothing and all the world was still except for the rippling music of my lyre. After a while it ended, without my deciding it, or his asking it.

‘You played well for her,’ he said after a silence. ‘See, look,’ he added, and suddenly from out of the apple trees whose blossom-laden boughs swept the floor of this island, Eurydice walked towards me, with that smile on her lips and a light in her eyes. My heart failed with me at the sight of her again, and the tears came starting to my eyes. But suddenly she was by me, and had my head between her hands, and was kissing away the tears. And then, she was safe in my arms again. The smell of her hair, I could scent it even above the too-sweet apple blossom. The love rushed up within me, as the apple blossom had rushed into the air at this strange god’s command.

‘You can take her,’ he said after a while, and there was a certain tone of laughter in his voice that struck the fear once again into my hear, ‘on one condition. Through that tunnel of darkness, you must never look back. Go’, he said, ‘Go now, and once you are in the tunnel, do not look back.’

I held her close one last time, and whispered my love into her ear. She only smiled and kissed me again and said, ‘I know. All your songs are echoed on my heartstrings.’

I felt the darkness coming, and we were in it, and she was plucked from my arms. I laid my fingers on the strings, though they seemed slack, but still I played, for I knew that it was the only way to win her from that place of too-sweet apples and too-bright sunlight and the voice coming inside my head from no-man’s mouth.

The darkness was eternally long, and slowly her footsteps grew further and further away and it seemed that bright Eurydice was growing tired. But I dared not look behind, though there seemed suddenly to be a great whispering all around me in the darkness, and the fear was twisting at my stomach until it seemed that it would all come rushing up my throat and spill out into this choking darkness. And that, I think, was the most frightening, for the darkness was in my mind, in my throat, in my eyes, and the voices were too. Some I seem to remember, for they tweaked at memories and stirred them awake until my fingers wanted to pause as I followed the thread of the past I had half caught. But I knew that I must not stop playing.

Suddenly, in the darkness behind me, I heard her scream. And I turned. I turned. Of course I did. I loved her.

The world seemed to slow, and the long drip of the last bead

of honey off the end of the spoon, and in it the tunnel split with light and I saw her, one last time, her eyes white-widened with fear as some dark shape pulled her back and back and back into the eternal darkness.

How can I describe the loss then? I seemed to splinter apart into the shooting light, and in my ears I heard her scream mixed with his laughing. Everything within me seemed to be blown away until there was only the tunnel-darkness left inside. And then, slowly, the world came back together, pulled in by my long groan of loss.

I think most men have heard of my Eurydice. They think they know what happened. But they do not and when they speak it, I see that they have already lost sight of the pain I felt when I lost her. It has become a story, nothing more. But to me, it is life. My life. For I am Orpheus, the harper and she was once my Eurydice.